

# ONLINE VERSUS TRADITIONAL NEWS SOURCES: A STUDENT PERSPECTIVE

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## ABSTRACT

*This paper, based on a survey of 282 respondents at an East Coast liberal arts college, examines student attitudes and behaviors towards use of news sources, preferences toward these sources, economic and purchasing behaviors, and directions for the future of these media sources.*

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## INTRODUCTION

Today's college students are flooded with an overwhelming number of forms and sources of accessing the news media, ranging from print publications and television to the Internet. This paper examines current student patterns in news consumption as well as their concomitant purchasing behavior, as a trend indicator for the future of news media channels, using a campus survey to assess current student attitudes.

College students constitute an especially important population in which to study news consumption behavior (Diddi & LaRose 2006), who are often beginning to establish news consumption patterns which they will have for their lifetime (e.g., Al-Obaidi, Lamb-Williams & Mordas, 2004; Barnhurst & Wartella, 1998; Schlagheck, 1998). Many media and news sources selectively target college students (Barnhurst & Wartella, 1998). During their college years students first come of age as voters, long-lasting political beliefs are shaped (Chaffee, Ward & Tipton, 1981; Langton, 1969; Newhagen, 1994) and patterns of news consumption that may persist for a lifetime are formed (Henke, 1985; O'Keefe & Spetnagel, 1973; Vincent & Basil, 1997). Studies by Okeefe & Spetnagel (1973) and Henke (1985) also revealed another important factor – a corresponding pattern of increasing news media use and an increased perception of news media's importance with an increase in one's year in college.

Henke (1985) reported that college students are in the midst of an important period of socialization to the news media during a dramatic, yet predictable change in their lives. College students are unlearning standards developed in their formative years, developing sex-roles and defining future roles, growing more independent, and moving toward establishing close relationships with peers, (Bowerman & Kinch 1959; Campbell 1969; Cobb 1986; Faber, Brown & McLeod

1979), while at the same time anticipating their full-time entry into their chosen professions.

Parker and Plank's (2000) study of media consumption by college students reported on the upward trend and increased importance of the Internet as a news and information source. Althaus and Tewksbury (2000) asserted that the Internet use is woven into the fabric of their daily lives and that student communities use the Web for news as well as entertainment. A national survey of media consumption found a substantial gain for Internet use between 1995 and 1999 (Stempel et al, 2000), and more recently a Pew Research Center study (2008) reports that 59% of Americans younger than 30 obtain most of their news online.

Diddi & LaRose (2006) asserts that college students may differ from the general population in news consumption because of the availability and access to the Internet, college newspapers, and other news sources at the library. Additionally, college students are not consuming news at the rates of older people and are less likely to read newspapers and watch network news (Bennett, 2000; Pew Research Center, 2002). According to the Pew Research Center, college students are more interested in following sports and entertainment news and are more likely to be "news grazers," who check news at regular intervals but do not have a particular time for detailed news consumption.

Consistent with the finding of others such as Stempel et al. (2000), Levins (1998), and Parker and Plank (2000), Diddi & LaRose (2006) indicate that college students rely on the Internet for obtaining news, but that as of this 2006 study "no evidence emerged that college students are abandoning traditional media for the new media forms" Rather, as initially argued by Stempel et al. (2000) and Holbert (2005), traditional and new media seem to be serving as complements to each other. Against this context, in an era where print media and its concomitant revenue sources have been declining, this study was designed to explore current

attitudes and preferences of college students as the next generation of educated news consumers.

## METHODOLOGY

A paper survey was administered to students at a liberal arts college on the East Coast during the fall term of 2009, containing 32 questions developed by the author assessing student attitudes toward news consumption, use of online versus traditional news channels, willingness to pay for news sources, and the impact of these news channels on purchasing behavior together with demographic information. The full survey is listed in Appendix A, and its questions were organized using a mix of response types as follows:

- Demographic questions included year of graduation, full versus part-time status, declared major, and gender.
- Questions on where students sought world/national and local news, as well as which of these were primary sources
- Questions on the use of hardcopy and online newspapers, willingness to pay for these services, reasons for purchasing them, and the amount respondents would be willing to pay.
- Whether students purchased goods or services over the past year as a result of advertising in online or offline news media, and how much was spent.
- Questions on an appropriate amount of time to be spent using online and offline news sources.
- Qualitative questions asking students to describe their expectations for news source, the strength of these expectations, and the one thing that would most improve each of the following news sources: newspapers, television, radio, news magazines, and Internet news sites.

Results from the survey questions listed above were then coded as quantitative values as specified by respondents, and a content analysis was performed on the qualitative questions to quantify these responses. This content analysis grouped these responses into specific categories for reporting, respectively, including "Other" and "No response."

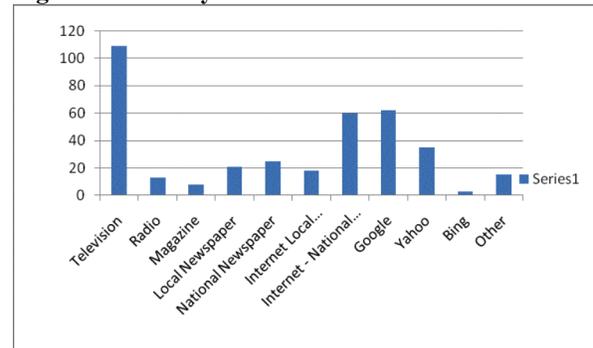
The 282 survey responses received had a distribution ranging from 17 to 28 percent of respondents from each undergraduate class, with a 75% to 25% ratio of females to males. Academic majors of respondents were skewed toward business and economics, encompassing management and marketing (21%), with other major clusters including nursing (8%), psychology (6%), history (6%), and speech and language (5%). Key result samples did not vary significantly according

to demographic information such as gender, major, or class year.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

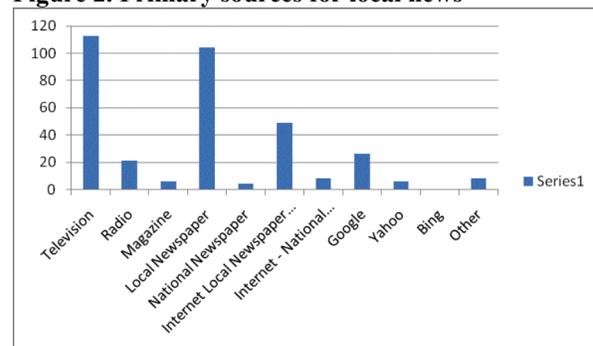
The current generation of students views the Internet as its primary source for national and world news, tracking trends toward the decline of traditional media in these areas. 178 respondents (63.1%) chose an Internet medium as their primary source for such news, versus 109 (38.7%) for newspapers, and no more than 25 for any other medium, as shown in Figure 1.

**Figure 1. Primary sources for national/world news**



Conversely, local news remains the domain of traditional media by a factor of more than two to one, as shown in Figure 2, with only 89 respondents (31.6%) using Internet media as their primary source versus 113 for television and 104 for local newspapers. Of the Internet respondents, over 55% used an online local newspaper as this primary source.

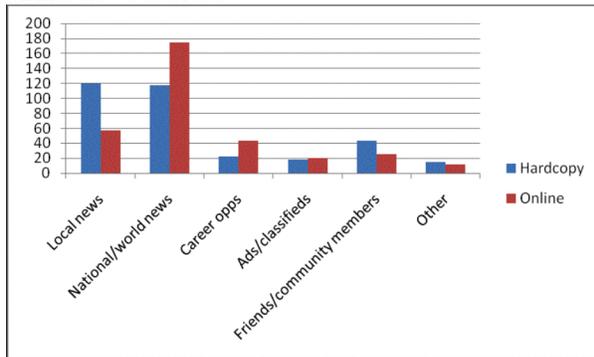
**Figure 2. Primary sources for local news**



There are also substantial differences in primary reasons for using hardcopy versus online news sources, as shown in Figure 3. Students prefer hardcopy media for local news as well as learning about friends and community members, the former by a factor of more than two to one, while they prefer online media for national/world news and career opportunities, with

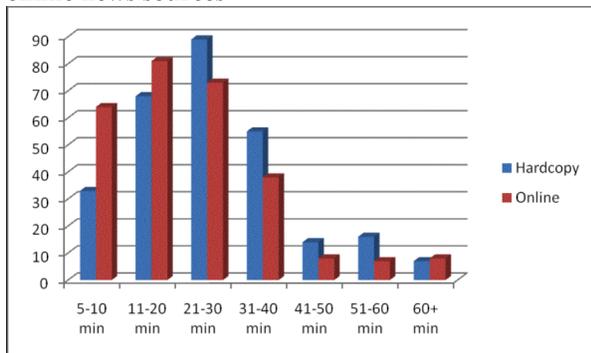
similar preferences for access to advertising and classified ads. Given the relatively recent history of Internet news channels, however, an important background story is the rapid growth of Internet channels in each of these areas relative to the traditional news media.

**Figure 3. Primary reasons for using hardcopy and online news sources**



The amount of time spent using these news sources confirms the findings of the Pew Research Center (2002) of students as "news grazers" as they increasingly adopt the use of online news channels. Figure 4 shows an increasing percentage of students spending shorter amounts of time reading online news, with nearly twice as many online uses (64 versus 33 respondents) spending ten minutes or less reading the news, and fewer online users spending 30 minutes or more versus hardcopy users.

**Figure 4. Amount of time spend using hardcopy and online news sources**

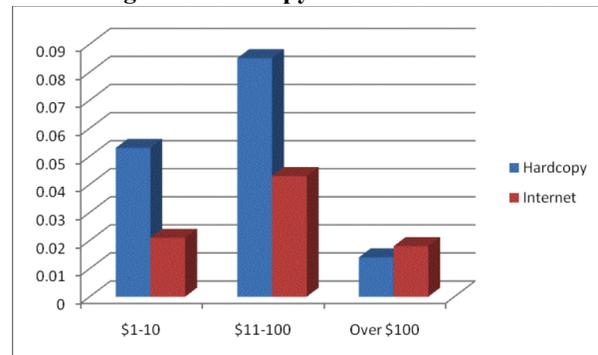


These survey results also cemented the reality that Internet news sources are seen as a free, advertiser-supported resource, with only 2 out of 282 respondents currently paying for access to an online newspaper, and less than 10% expressing a willingness to do so after graduation. Of those willing to pay, all but three respondents would pay no more than \$20 per month, with more than half (63 out of 109 respondents) willing to pay no more than \$10 per month. Conversely, the majority of respondents currently pay for newspaper

subscriptions or obtain such newspapers from a paying secondary source, with 153 respondents (55%) planning to pay for a subscription following graduation.

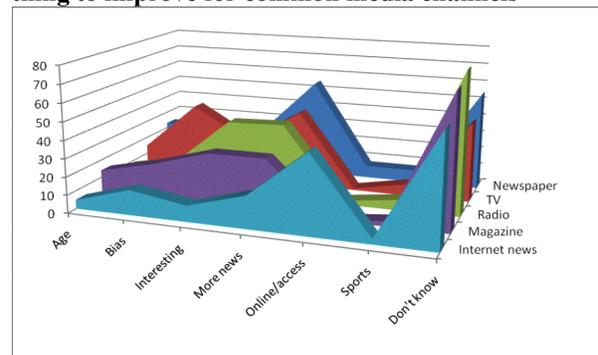
Given the reality of an advertiser-supported Internet news channel for the immediate future, it is instructive to look at student purchasing behavior as a result of Internet versus traditional news channels. 17.4 percent of students purchased products as a result of advertising in hardcopy newspapers, versus 9.2 percent of those using online news sources. However, a higher percentage of Internet users made purchases totaling more than \$10 (74% versus 65%) and more than \$100 (21.7% versus 9.3%) compared with those using hardcopy news sources, as shown in Figure 5.

**Figure 5. Purchases over past year as a result of advertising from hardcopy and online news sources**



Examining the single most important thing to improve for each media source for their generation, there was a very clear split between how students currently view online versus traditional news sources, as shown in Figure 6. A content analysis on the respondents' answers broke these responses down into categories of more age-appropriate news, less bias, more interesting content, more news content, online availability (or better accessibility for Internet media), and more sports, as well as a broad range of other responses.

**Figure 6. Content analysis of single most important thing to improve for common media channels**



Students rated bias as a much bigger problem in most traditional media, with 24 (8.5%) and 42 (14.9%) respondents citing this for newspapers and television respectively, versus only 14 (5.0%) for Internet news sources. Substantially fewer also rated Internet news sources as needing to be more interesting or provide more news, by a factor ranging from 0.6 (18 versus 30) to 0.2 (9 versus 41). Conversely, the greatest area for improvement in Internet news was accessibility, with 44 (15.6%) of responses.

## CONCLUSIONS

This survey data provides some important conclusions relative to student attitudes and behaviors toward news media channels, which in turn points toward trends for the future of these channels. Key findings include the following:

- There is a saying that "all news is local," and local news remains the domain of traditional news media; however, online media channels have made strong inroads in this area, particularly online editions of local newspapers.
- Internet-based channels have come to dominate all other media as a source for world and national news as well as other areas such as career opportunities.
- The free, advertiser-supported model for most current Internet news channels, an issue that is often discussed as part of the decline of print media in particular, appears to be here to stay for the foreseeable future. While many students expressed annoyance at excessive advertising or pop-up ads as part of their qualitative survey responses, many fewer expressed a willingness to pay for access to such channels, versus the traditional subscription model of print media.
- Conversely, the quality of access to the Internet remains an issue for the majority of students. Accessibility concerns, ranging from ease of use to the quality of Internet connectivity, are far and away the major area for improvement seen by students for Internet news channels.
- While bias and the quality of news content are among the biggest concerns overall for students with news media channels, they have a much higher level of trust and satisfaction in this areas for Internet news channels.

Taken together, these trends point to an increasingly on-line world of access to news providing more information while catering to shorter attention spans, with the potential for growth in purchasing behavior among its users. Areas for future research include ex-

ploring larger sample sizes as well as tracking the changes of these preferences over time, particularly as students reach adulthood, enter careers and family life, and gain in purchasing power. By understanding what has become a radical evolution in our needs for news and information, we can successfully engage the media industry and help it evolve to meet these needs in the future.

## APPENDIX: SURVEY CONTENTS

1. What year did or do you expect to graduate from college?
2. Are you a full-time or part-time student?
3. What is your major?
4. What is your gender?
5. In the past twelve months, where did you seek information or assistance for world/national news? Check all that apply: (Television, Radio, Magazine, Local Newspaper, National Newspaper, Internet – Local newspaper on-line, Internet – National newspaper on-line, Internet – Google, Internet – Yahoo, Internet – Bing, Other)
6. If you do seek information or assistance, what do you consider to be your primary source for information or assistance for world/national news? Check one: (Television, Radio, Magazine, Local Newspaper, National Newspaper, Internet – Local newspaper on-line, Internet – National newspaper on-line, Internet – Google, Internet – Yahoo, Internet – Bing, Other)
7. In the past twelve months, where did you seek information or assistance for local news? Check all that apply: (Television, Radio, Magazine, Local Newspaper, National Newspaper, Internet – Local newspaper on-line, Internet – National newspaper on-line, Internet – Google, Internet – Yahoo, Internet – Bing, Other)
8. If you did seek information or assistance, what do you consider to be your primary source for information or assistance for local news? Check one: (Television, Radio, Magazine, Local Newspaper, National Newspaper, Internet – Local newspaper on-line, Internet – National newspaper on-line, Internet – Google, Internet – Yahoo, Internet – Bing, Other)
9. How often do you read a hard-copy newspaper: (Daily, 2-3 times per week, Once a month, Once a year, Never)
10. How often do you read an on-line newspaper: (Daily, 2-3 times per week, Once a month, Once a year, Never)
11. Do you pay for an online newspaper? (Yes, No)
12. Do you pay for hard-copy newspapers? (Yes, No - don't use, No - read from secondary sources)
13. Do you have a subscription for a daily hard-copy newspaper? (Yes, No)

14. When you graduate, do you expect to purchase a subscription for a daily hard-copy newspaper? (Yes, No)
15. When you graduate, do you expect to purchase a subscription for a daily online newspaper? (Yes, No)
16. Why would you purchase a hard-copy newspaper? Check all that apply: (Gain information on local news, Gain information on world/national news, Gain information on career opportunities, Gain information on items for sale, See friends or community members listed in the paper, Other)
17. Which of these is the main reason you would purchase a hard-copy newspaper: Check one: (Gain information on local news, Gain information on world/national news, Gain information on career opportunities, Gain information on items for sale, See friends or community members listed in the paper, Other)
18. Why would you use an online newspaper: Check all that apply: (Gain information on local news, Gain information on world/national news, Gain information on career opportunities, Gain information on items for sale, See friends or community members listed in the paper, Other)
19. Which of these is the main reason you would use an online newspaper: Check one: (Gain information on local news, Gain information on world/national news, Gain information on career opportunities, Gain information on items for sale, See friends or community members listed in the paper, Other)
20. How much would you be willing to pay (\$) per month to subscribe to an on-line newspaper: (If not willing to pay, specify "0")
21. Have you purchased products advertised in a hard-copy newspaper over the last year: (Yes, No)
22. How much did you spend (\$) last year to purchase products advertised in a hardcopy newspaper over the last year: (If no purchases, specify "0")
23. Have you purchased products advertised in an on-line newspaper over the last year: (Yes, No)
24. How much did you spend (\$) last year to purchase products advertised in an online newspaper over the last year: (If no purchases, specify "0"):
25. What do you feel is an appropriate amount of time to spend reading a hard-copy newspaper: (5-10 minutes, 11-20 minutes, 21-30 minutes, 31-40 minutes, 41-50 minutes, 51-60 minutes, More than 60 minutes)
26. What do you feel is an appropriate amount of time to spend reading an on-line newspaper: (5-10 minutes, 11-20 minutes, 21-30 minutes, 31-40 minutes, 41-50 minutes, 51-60 minutes, More than 60 minutes)
27. I expect my news source to be: (list three things, and rate each Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree, or Strongly Disagree)
28. As a college student, what is the one thing that would most improve newspapers for your generation?

29. As a college student, what is the one thing that would most improve TV news for your generation?
30. As a college student, what is the one thing that would most improve radio news for your generation?
31. As a college student, what one thing would most improve news-magazines for your generation?
32. As a college student, what one thing would most improve internet news sites for your generation?

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